

WAR ON TERROR | More than 7,000 people have sought refuge at Dadaab camp

Somalis flee in fear of fresh fight

Amisom troops and Somali National Army have in the recent past intensified their attacks against Shabaab bases

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Thousands of people have fled the port city of Kismayu for Dadaab refugee camp.

The UN yesterday said more than 7,500 people have fled in the last four days as African Union troops intensified their push to capture the southern Somalia stronghold of Al-Shabaab militants.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) spokesman said in a statement that this month, more than 10,000 people have fled, fearing resumed fighting.

Mr Adrian Edwards told reporters in Geneva that the UNHCR was closely following the situation around Kismayu as thousands fled fearing military activity and new clashes.

"Movements substantially increased on Monday and have been continuing since, and some 7,500 people fled the area in the past four days amid growing tension," he said.

Mr Edwards said the majority of those displaced are heading to villages in other parts of Kismayu district as well as villages in the neighbouring



A Kenyan soldier in Somalia. Amisom troops have intensified campaigns to capture the strategic port city of Kismayu.

Jilib and Jamame districts. Some are also moving towards Mogadishu and Dadaab refugee camps.

"According to our partners on the ground, most of those fleeing Kismayu say that they are planning to return as soon as the situation stabilizes," Mr Edwards said, adding: "There are reports of sporadic militia attacks and looting. The displaced also fear being caught in the crossfire and possible reprisal attacks by armed groups operating in the town."

UNHCR's representative in Somalia Bruno Geddo said some of those fleeing fear being used as human shields should fighting erupt in Kismayu. The

Security Council has condemned recent bombings in Mogadishu, adding that it is "deplorable" that ordinary Somalis are being targeted after the important gains made in recent weeks in completing the country's transition. The attacks were "cowardly and senseless," it said.

UN Secretary-General's Special Representative and head of the UN Political Office for Somalia Augustine P. Mahiga condemned attacks against civilians, security personnel and journalists after suicide bombers set off at least two explosions at a popular restaurant in Mogadishu on Thursday, killing at least a dozen people.

ADVANCES

Captured stronghold

■ African Union Mission in Somalia (Amisom) captured Baidoa, a key town near the port city of Kismayu, which was a major stronghold of Al-Shabaab in southern Somalia.

■ In the past fortnight, Amisom has captured Bilbi and other towns and several villages, advancing towards Kismayu.

■ The AU troops are advancing on Birta, a strategic Al-Shabaab outpost west of Kismayu.

ANALYSIS | Rashid Abdi

Amisom forces must brace for high insecurity in Kismayu after capture

Regional armies and their Somali allies, advancing on multiple fronts, are closing in on the southern Somalia port city of Kismayu. And as is widely predicted, the fall of the city may be just days away.

If that happens, it would, undoubtedly, mark a turning point in the military struggle against the militant insurgent group, Al-Shabaab.

For the Kenya Defence Forces and its Amisom and Somali allies, it will be a great victory — a vindication of the huge sacrifices made and the resolve to press on with the campaign, often against heavy odds and widespread scepticism.

Fears of a major bloodbath have somewhat receded, but not disappeared. Some 10,000 civilians have fled Kismayu in the last few days, fearful of a potential bloody showdown.

But developments this week have to some extent eased public anxieties, not least the decision by Al-Shabaab to pull out its fighters and heavy weapons from the city.

All indications would seem to suggest the group may have lost the nerve to put up a last stand.

This is a huge relief, but many unexpected issues could complicate the KDF and

Amisom's determined quest to "deliver" the city.

What is certain though, is that remnants of the insurgency will remain a great nuisance long after Kismayu is recovered.

It is almost certain Al-Shabaab will seek to maximise its so-called asymmetric advantage and step up its terror campaign to destabilise the city, just as it has done in other recovered areas, principally Mogadishu.

But assuming everything works relatively well for the alliance on the military front, attention will inevitably shift to two critical issues key in undermining support for the insurgency and stabilising the city in the longer term — security and governance.

There are cynics who believe Kismayu is a poisoned chalice — a complicated and deeply fragmented city that could prove more complicated to govern than Mogadishu. Much of the pessimism and

doom-laden prognosis is based on extrapolation of the experience in the Somali capital.

Undeniably, Mogadishu is the quintessential Somali cautionary tale — a reminder of the inadequacy of military gains alone to restore security, especially when law enforcement institutions are rudimentary, dysfunctional or non-existent.

There, the retreat of Al-Shabaab has reopened old societal fissures, heightened inter-clan contestation and led to the proliferation of armed groupings and general crime.

At his official inauguration last week, Somalia's new President, Hassan Sheikh Mahmud, spelt out his key priorities and, unsurprisingly, security was at the top.

The President said: "Security is my number one, number two and number three priority."

It is perhaps a bit presumptuous to argue that the Mogadishu scenario will replicate itself in Kismayu; nonetheless it is a risk that must never be discounted. Indeed, one for which Amisom must be adequately prepared for.

